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Published by

Soderlind, Lori.
The Change: My Great American, Postindustrial, Midlife Crisis Tour.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/113342.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/113342
As I drove south toward Pittsburgh, the rain did not let up. It took the heat away and the heat never really came back after that, or when it did it came only in flashes that seemed like mistakes. Hot flashes. Bursts of wet heat from beneath my skin. Cruel reminders of change, and I missed summer already and I wanted it back.

While driving, I listened to Jessica tell me over the phone about something at work that was making her way too busy. This disrupted my focus. It’s hard to be with the plight of humanity and my dog and my soul-searching self when I’m on the phone with Jessica and she has had her morning coffee and she is chattering without stopping for breath. Note that I did love this about her. Just not right then. News from home had a palpability that wrenched me from my private Pithole. The world of work and general busyness was out of place on the Great American Midlife Crisis road trip, on which I had gone off to study places more troubled than even I was over what they had lost, or appeared to be losing, or had wanted so much but had never quite managed to get their hands around, all of which left them (and me) afraid for what lay ahead, if indeed anything did lay ahead—other than slow decline and ruin and, of course, eventually death. I wanted to drive and drive until I could know for certain that something good was right straight ahead of us and that I knew at last how to find it.
That’s when Pittsburgh flashed up in front of me and I nearly hit it. Jessica was saying, “Words, words, words, sigh, words, sigh, words,” and I said, “Ummm, yeah. Uh huh, mmm,” and the highway led without fanfare to a bridge, and I drove onto the bridge, and then all at once there was Pittsburgh like a bobbing jack-in-the-box, cranked up tight till it popped: Bang! I’m Pittsburgh! Glass towers above a river, a bright and shiny mural I was about to smash into.


Then the road curved down and the car did not strike Pittsburgh but instead was ushered safely around to the right. At the edge of the city down along the river were old waterfront office buildings squatting beneath a modern sky-scraping metropolis like quaint, musty shadows, and then around another bend, the whole mirage was gone. There were tunnels, and all forms of bridges—bridges over water and bridges over roads, bridges carrying cars, bridges carrying trains, and the trains were full of slag and oar and ingots all tugged by diesel engines, muscling in and out of Pittsburgh. The city was pitched at its edges, heavy with the fruit of superhuman labors. I wanted to go back to see all this again, but first I had to ditch the trailer.

Colby and I made camp at a KOA in Washington, Pennsylvania, about twenty miles outside Pittsburgh. The KOA was essentially a large, muddy parking lot on top of a steep hill. Our presence instantly brought down the real estate value in that KOA, by which I mean my Scamp was a slum in a fabulous collection of high-end luxury RVs and trailers, all of them decked out in patios with gas grills and flat-screen TVs. Outdoor television on a camper, imagine that. I set up the Scamp awning to shelter Colby and me from the rain, and later when the rain finally stopped, I strung my damp socks and Colby’s wet leashes on the awning to dry.

Next to us in the campground’s low-rent corner was a retired couple in a van who had been traveling all summer to see baseball games in the hometown parks of every baseball team they had never seen play before. It was a great project. They had logged thousands of miles doing this, gone to so many places they never would have seen if not for baseball. They had come to Pittsburgh to see the Pirates in a playoff game. I told them my own project involved traveling with my dog on an epic tour of depressed,
ruined, and seemingly hopeless places whose best days were behind them and whose futures, sadly, looked bleak indeed. The couple stood very still, smiling, waiting for me to say I was kidding. I didn’t say it. We were in a standoff. “Well, have fun!” the woman finally said, and we all went about our business.

We were damp and cold, and I did laundry at the KOA mainly so that I could sit on the clothes dryer and warm myself as it rolled. The Scamp had a gas-powered furnace, but I hadn’t yet read the manual to learn how to ignite it, which was a daunting and potentially dangerous project. I also had not once used the bathroom I had insisted that my trailer have as a safety feature. I couldn’t quite accept the idea of peeing into a sub-trailer bin and storing my urine, etcetera, down under where I slept only to pour it out into a sewer later. Public restrooms so far worked fine.

I put a blanket on the floor in the laundry room for Colby and he lay down by my feet as the dryer tumbled and I read a magazine about people who travel the world in their boats. In it was a profile of the woman who had played the part of a cruise ship activities director named Julie in *The Love Boat*, a TV show on the ABC network from 1977 to 1987 that I watched faithfully as a kid, spending Saturday nights on the couch with a snack, usually sitting with my mother and her needlepoint. Life was so easy, then, when even bad TV seemed wonderful. These pleasures were quaint. Sometimes I want these pleasures back. In hindsight I see that this show began in the decade of Watergate and gas rationing and long lines at gas stations and stagflation and post–Vietnam War social disorder and unemployment and polyester leisure suits and all kinds of ominous signs of impending doom but, see, *Love Boat* helped us heal from all that, like we could go back to a life that was simple again, and I felt safer watching TV with my mom than going out into my painful teenaged Saturday night misadventures. It was all okay, with *Love Boat*. In the magazine article that I read at the KOA near Pittsburgh, I learned that in real life, Julie had been a raging coke addict.

Wait. How had I not known this? The fresh-faced lady on that boat where folks found love when it was least expected, *that* Julie, the blonde in the blazer, had been coked out the whole time? Pop culture tricked me. Reading this article, which tried but failed to draw my attention to her
recovery, somehow robbed me of many innocent years. And yet I was also richly fascinated, as I often am when I discover the world is a much darker and more dangerous place than I had once imagined. There is a relief in knowing the truth, however dark, and also a relief in accepting that life is not TV.

The next morning, the baseball couple left and a truck pulled up and a sixty-something couple sprung from it and began opening a pop-up trailer into a groovy A-frame-shaped triangle thing, and then they pulled out some patio furniture and opened the windows and in about forty-five seconds, wow, they were right at home. Their truck’s North Carolina license plate rim said U.S. Navy Retired.

The man who drove the truck was wearing a U.S. Navy Retired baseball cap and greeted me with a handshake so vigorous it felt like part of a training exercise. “Hello there, young lady!” he said, nearly saluting, and I loved him for judging my perimenopausal self young, though I couldn’t decide if he was saying it the wrong way, as in, the way I’ve heard cops or deli clerks call quite elderly and easily confused old women “young lady” with jovial kindness. This usually comes just as the old bag nearly drops something heavy or damn near trips on a rug and breaks a hip. “Ho ho,” the jovial cop might say, coming to the rescue. “Watch it there young lady, looks like you’ve had a little tumble!” Was I that kind of young lady? The old kind? I was not sure. How old was forty-nine? Older than I wanted it to be, but beyond that, I had lost my bearings.

Pat and Richard were in their late sixties. They told me they had met after they had both been widowed; they had been married to each other for four years—“As of next Thursday,” Richard said, smiling. Pat pulled a thread off his shoulder and fixed his collar in a way that somehow said, “We’ll be having sex tonight.”

“We met on Christian mingle,” she said.

“Darn right,” he said. “We never would have met without the internet.”

Suddenly I felt as if I had missed the sexual revolution not once but twice—first it was the whole birth control pill/liberation/dopey-hippie orgy of the 1960s that passed while I was still in diapers; then while I was busy looking back at that bawdy time with confused envy, this whole internet dating situation developed, and people were not only dating but
also hooking up casually with hot strangers. It was all just click, boom, sex. I had paired off in time to miss the whole thing, and while it did occur to me that a road trip might be a place to give it a go and not get caught, I also remembered I was on that road to begin with because I had caught myself straying. There I was, doing it again in my mind. Why? What did I want so badly? It was more than sex. According to The Girls, married people were generally better off without sex, though I watched Richard and Pat and knew better. I needed something that was sex but not sex, and I didn’t know why I didn’t have it or how I could get it, and I could not safely ask anyone about it. Anyone I talked to would either judge me, I was sure, or would end up realizing how fucked up her own private life was, how much of a loveless desert she had agreed to endure. This is why “private lives” are private. They’re too godawful to reveal. We all know. You raise this shit with a friend, you may as well go write a book about it, tell everyone. No one’s that dumb. Listen, it’s never just sex you’re talking about when you talk about sex in a marriage, or a long relationship; it’s a confluence of many things we’re afraid of, among the scariest of which is the likelihood we will wreck the relationship we’re secretly unhappy with if all this difficult truth gets out of its box. Jess and I tried, but long ago had reached an impasse, and folded our impasse up and put it in a box in service to a greater happiness, we thought. I would have liked to have kept all this business in its box and I really did try, but all the fear that had flowed through me since the generally happy Jess era began and much more from long before then had been stuffed into that box and it was too much and time passed and I changed and I could no longer contain it. Bang. This stuff was springing up like a big scary clown. Surprise! Like Pittsburgh.

“You traveling all alone?” Pat asked me at the campground as she stroked Richard’s cheek.

“No,” I said. “I have my dog.”

Colby lay on his blanket chewing a stick. I watched Pat’s eyes move to Colby and back to me as she worked the puzzle of my relationship status. “Well, that’s sweet,” she said. Apparently to some, a woman without another human is alone, dog or no dog.

Let me say here that I really did love Colby. Let me be careful to add that I did not actually have a “romantic” love for my dog, and though I can
admit that it had crossed my mind as I drove around Pennsylvania that I almost loved Colby enough to marry him, I was only thinking that because Western Pennsylvania is Rick Santorum country. In 2003, when he was a U.S. senator, Rick Santorum famously gave an interview to Lara Jakes Jordan, an Associated Press reporter, in which he said gay marriage would open a door to all kinds of nontraditional and ungodly relationships, and next thing you know, people would be marrying their dogs. Did he have a point? I think Colby would have agreed to marry me before Jessica ever did; Jessica was no fan of marriage. She had made that clear and it was one of the few things we had ever really fought about, because I liked the idea of marrying. It symbolized connection, as deep as it could be, and that is what I wanted. To stay with Jess meant giving up that desire. But I hadn’t, really. Anyhow: Santorum’s position was that such a shocking cultural evolution must be stopped before it starts, maybe even before anyone gives it a passing thought. I had therefore given much passing thought to marrying my dog because Rick Santorum brought it up.

“In every society,” Rick Santorum told Jordan, “the definition of marriage has not ever to my knowledge included homosexuality. That’s not to pick on homosexuality. It’s not, you know, man on child, man on dog, or whatever the case may be.”

At this point, Jordan perked up.

“I’m sorry,” she interjected. “I didn’t think I was going to talk about ‘man on dog’ with a United States senator.”

I’ve always wondered about the tone of her “I’m sorry” in that moment. I had known Lara as a young reporter at her first job, back in Albany, where for a time during my newspaper years I had been one of her editors, so I can kind of see her in this exchange—her very blonde head, her very straight back, her very seriously perplexed face. Lara Jakes Jordan is a sharp woman. By the time she met Senator Santorum, she had interviewed some heavy hitters, including Hilary Clinton when Clinton was a senator. But man-on-dog can throw anyone. Judging only by the transcript of this interview, my guess is that she sat there perplexed, unblinking, as the senator reeled off examples of unholy relationships, and then she snapped out of it and said “I’m sorry,” as in, “I’m sorry, I froze there for a moment. Did I actually hear you say what I thought I heard you say?”
“There are consequences to letting people live out whatever wants or passions they desire,” said Rick Santorum.

“Sorry,” Jordan said. “I just never expected to talk about that when I came here to interview you.”

Pat and Richard did not judge my love for Colby as Rick Santorum would have, or at least not outwardly. I petted Colby and Pat petted Richard and then they launched into a story about taking a cross-country trip in their other RV, their thirty-two-footer, back when they were first married. They took Richard’s eight-seven-year-old mother along with them, and they told me about how each night as newlyweds they couldn’t wait till everyone went to bed and they heard old mom snoring and it was such a relief when they finally heard that snoring because it meant they could finally . . . you know. You know.

I’m sorry. This astonished me. I had been three or four days in Pennsylvania where I had found hardly anyone wanting to talk to me about anything and now I got randy Christians talking fornication within ten minutes of our shaking hands. I backed away to my chaste little trailer. I felt glad to know how lustily life does go on even after, you know. You know. The change, that god awful, inevitable midlife fucking change that changes everything. No one wants to change. Yet all that change goes on and on and then look: Pat is still alive and Richard loves her and she loves him, and as they neared seventy they had been married such a short time and had probably fornicated more than half the people I knew had for years. I was clearly being given the sign I had been asking for: something good was right ahead, I was not too old; there was time and love waiting. Yet I did not know how to get to it, and this troubled me, and also I did not want to get stuck with a mental image of Pat and Richard and you know, you know. So I excused myself to go fix Colby’s breakfast.

Sunday was football day and the Steelers were playing the night game down in their home stadium on the Ohio River. I dressed Colby up in his blue dinosaur scarf and we went downtown to mix with a herd of sports fans who were either leaving the baseball park after that afternoon’s Pirates game or going to the football stadium to watch the Steelers. Pittsburgh’s
waterfront was teeming with pedestrians, possibly none of whom would be there if not for major league sports.

Lately, cities had been on a binge of building stadiums and arenas as a way of drawing humans back to the inner cities, and just about every city I visited on my journey had a new one—even Erie, even Utica. Even Brooklyn, come to think of it, had opened Barclays Center just a year before. Pittsburgh was ahead of the curve on the arena concept because it had a stadium on its waterfront as early as 1909; ninety-two years later, the city imploded its old football stadium and built a new one nearby and opened a separate stadium for baseball next to it, because if one stadium was good, dear lord, two would be fantastic. Now Pittsburgh’s riverfront stadium zone hums on weekends when it might otherwise be dead. I visited the waterfront on game night as a matter of economic research but was also doing a very serious study to assess how many Pittsburgh Steelers tailgaters would walk up to Colby and say, “Aw, he’s so cute!” and/or “What kind of dog is he?” and/or lavish love and admiration on him with happy sounds that aren’t really words. This important study of my dog produced no surprises; the rain had let up and the beer was flowing and the number of Colby fans turned out to be too high to count. Colby soaked it up.

Later, when the Steelers game started and the party moved into the stadium, Colby and I walked back across the Ohio River on the Roberto Clemente Bridge, named after a famous Pirates right fielder. The bridges of Pittsburgh, I should note, are not frilly gaudy things but strong and silent types—Bridges in the Hands of an Angry God, Calvinist work-worshiping expanses of industry, lined up one after another down the straight lines of the three rivers that meet in Pittsburgh: the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio. When they are lit and you look downstream at the lot of them, the bridges seem to go on forever. One morning, riding on a riverboat full of ladies on a field trip, I studied these bridges and I thought of Italy and of the Ponte Vecchio—the “old bridge”—one of five bridges that cross the Arno River in Florence; the Ponte Vecchio dates to AD 996, except that it got destroyed a couple times so really, the bridge I saw was not the original old bridge but a new one, built in 1345. The original Ponte Vecchio stood only 350 years, a paltry blip and yet a blip far longer than the life of the United States and three times the age of any bridge in Pittsburgh.
The bridge that replaced the first Ponte Vecchio is plain and boxy, a working bridge with commercial stalls on it; the butchers whose shops were on that bridge in the fourteenth century maybe never thought, as they worked, that one day, someone like me would buy postcards instead of tripe in those stalls, or stand on the shore beneath the old bridge thinking in that moment, which would pass, that the old bridge was the most curious, lovely sight in all the world.

Looking up at the steel spans of Pittsburgh I imagined I was seeing the Florence of some future age, so beautiful and unappreciated for now, but given a few more centuries, who knows. The city had already reclaimed itself from the mess of its industrial glory days, when it was full of hard labor. Yet for now at least, Pittsburgh can’t so easily be separated from the story of American industry, as if sweat still runs in those rivers. The first oil barges from Oil City landed there, and for a century the valleys around Pittsburgh were one long, steel-making furnace, fueled by coal dug from those Allegheny Mountains that had been so hard to cross. What were mountains after all but huge mounds of rock and ore piled up by god and waiting to be taken, waiting for humans to alchemize wealth. What Americans most valued was really very ugly: we stripped and wrung and battered riches from the ground we raged across. Americans had been like Vikings sacking their own declared home, and Pittsburgh was a poster child for that sacking. Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick smelted their coke-and-steel fortunes here, even as they smote unions with iron fists. Tugboats ferried Pinkerton guards across the water one night in 1892, landing upstream in a city called Homestead where they shot and killed striking steelworkers. Walking out on billionaires is a crime just that bad, it seems.

Lots of nasty stuff went down in Pittsburgh. People mocked its grit from the start. H. L. Mencken described its “agonizing ugliness” in a 1927 essay: “Here was the very heart of industrial America . . . the boast and pride of the richest and grandest nation ever seen on earth—and here was a scene so dreadfully hideous, so intolerably bleak and forlorn that it reduced the whole aspiration of man to a macabre and depressing joke.”

Nice! The whole aspiration of man. Twisted up into hell. I get that. I’ve been disappointed too. I found it hard to explain, but places that can be described as “dreadfully hideous” begged me to see them. The “dread”
part most of all. How can you heal what you can’t even see? But then, bang: Pittsburgh. There you are, darling. I feel you now.

On football night, boats ranging in stature from runabouts to yachts with dining rooms were moored on the rivers around Pittsburgh and fans were partying and all the grief could be erased; there were no oil skiffs around, no tugboats. I wanted to watch the Steelers game, by which I mean football and not some kind of war between striking workers and armed guards. I dreamed of finding the quintessential football-watching spot in or around rugged, honest, blue-collar Pittsburgh, but that dreamed-of spot must be in some basement man cave because Colby and I drove around looking but we did not find a watering hole in a mill town where neighbors gather in the dim, warm light and quaff tulip pints of lager, and where, when something good happens on the field (which always would happen because this vision is of the great world, the perfect world, the world in which the Steelers always win) the whole room erupts into cheers. I had this image of American working towns, and of steel workers especially: muscled men in plaid work shirts, sleeves rolled up to their triceps, telephone pole legs slathered in blue jeans. I was thinking of a mural by Diego Rivera; I was thinking of Bruce Springsteen. And why wouldn’t I? Who doesn’t want their old, run-down industrial city streets to be lined with bars all full of Bruce Springsteen? It’s our collective myth; it is the northern industrial city version of a rural country music fantasy. Cowboy towns and steel towns are places, we are given to believe, where hunky man-singers work very hard and hold their liquor and love women with pure hearts. The world is tough but these men can take it and they deserve your sweet love, lady, so jump on up into that enormous twin-cab pickup truck and give your love up. Or Else.

This fantasy appreciates nothing of how dire things had become for that working-class dude, how badly the myth had failed him by the second decade of the twenty-first century, when he didn’t even have a fighting chance in a labor war because there was hardly any labor anymore; whatever working-class nirvana I imagined was out there waiting for me in Pittsburgh I had missed by at least a generation, and I ended up watching the Steelers game at a chain restaurant bar next to a motel in a fast-food zone in Monroeville.
If Monroeville wasn’t my ideal industrial city football neighborhood, it was the model early twenty-first-century American town. It is a first-ring suburb of a big old city cluttered up with strip malls and a few University of Pittsburgh medical buildings. It is full of people in cars, waiting for the light to change. The original downtown Monroeville is just one block long and buried in sprawl, and I never saw it.

Inside the chain restaurant, a drunken man stood near me at the bar, where I had parked myself across from the TV. He saw that I was writing in a notebook during commercials and he asked me about it. He was a sullen, unhappy drunken man; the Steelers were losing to the Bears, which he observed with an occasional grimace and a goddamnit look, then drowned his pain in long slurps of beer. Steelers losing? Yep, they suck, Ben Roethlisberger sucks, coach sucks. Watching the game at a chain restaurant on a motel strip outside Pittsburgh? Yeah well, the situation sucks. Had more to drink than you just told your wife on your phone? Yeah well, she sucks, and by the way, mind your own business, you suck.

He said, “I’m not trying to be a total dick or anything, I just want to know what you’re writing.” It is a funny thing about drunken men who insist they are not being total dicks; saying this almost automatically proves they are, in fact, being total dicks and they know it but on some level they wish it weren’t true.

I told him I was keeping a journal of my travels. He asked me why I had “traveled” to Pittsburgh (and the quotation marks here indicate his emphasis, suggesting that no one “travels” to Pittsburgh if they can help it). I looked into his red-ringed eyes as he faced me, weaving, and I told him I was interested in cities that were struggling to remake themselves. That’s a simple way I had found to explain what I was doing. I had not understood, before I looked, how much loss was around us—but loss of what? Did Pittsburgh really mourn for its mills and slums? The sorrow seemed to me to be more abstract, like a loss of faith in ourselves, or maybe even a sick, sad revelation that we had never really been happy at all. Or was I imagining my own life again? I worked this puzzle in my notebook.

I should have just told the drunken man that I was attending a really boring conference on medical appliances. But I didn’t. I said “cities,” “struggling,” “remaking themselves,” and “me interested.” The drunken...
man let out a snort before I finished the word “struggling.” Possibly his snort would have been a laugh but he had caught it in time, choked it, avoided all signs of joy—even the unparalleled joy of mocking something someone else was into. He squelched this dangerous mirth with beer. I plugged my yap with pinot noir. He said I should come see the cesspool where he lived, which I learned was Harrisburg. He was in Pittsburgh because he worked for the railroad, a job that seemed to piss him off. He told me that the way the steel mills and freight trains have gone all to hell is criminal and mainly the fault of liberal ignorance and government incompetence that has destroyed the whole country.

Of course, nothing screams “liberal ignorance” louder than a lone woman at a restaurant bar drinking wine and writing in a notebook. But I was determined to reach across this divide. So I told him that I had gone to college in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, back in the 1980s not long before the steel mills there closed. I told him that one of the only things I missed about my time in college was the way every night around three in the morning, if I happened to step outside—and for whatever reason in those days I often did step outside at three in the morning—I could hear the trains going in and out of the steel mills, and from that hillside campus, I could see below me in the darkness all the hundreds of small lights that always burned at the mill; they looked like stars scattered down there, hanging in air scented thick with sulfur and burnt rubber. Bethlehem had been a mighty city, an engine of empire, the very place that had milled the steel that made the Golden Gate Bridge, but all I knew of it at eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old, was that its steel mills were curiously beautiful and I took comfort in their presence late at night. The industrial hum soothed me when I was lonely. There was life down there. Even the acrid smell, which at first seemed offensive, became something I loved because it revealed a depth to life I had been sheltered from.

“It was the smell of people working,” I said.

Well, that did it. Even I knew that I had gone too far when I said the thing about the work smell. Really, I had hoped to say things the trainman might enjoy. He was such a sourpuss. But I knew there was no pleasing angry drunks, generally, and my words showed no genuine appreciation of
rough, tough American guys like him with almost nowhere left to use their brawn these days. Those guys didn’t fit into the modern economy of strip malls and medical billing centers; their hands were too thick to make lattes at Starbucks and even if they could, they would only make ten bucks an hour, so fuck it.

The trainman focused on the middle space just above the rim of his glass and sucked down some beer and then he said that if I wanted to understand what had happened to America, I should start by learning this: there is so much coal in this country, so goddamn much coal. If we could mine and haul and burn the stuff it would be like the good old days, when people worked, but our government is too goddamn stupid. We can’t burn the coal because of the EPA’s fucked up antipollution rules. And what we do dig up we sell to China and then they burn it to power their own generators and then they make stuff and they rise to glory. See that? They burn the coal, the air is just as fouled as if we had burned it, but we don’t get to make steel and our power plants get shut down. And some guy in Asia has a job that we don’t. We get it coming and going, right up the ass. Pardon the French. He sipped his beer.

He kept trying to excuse himself for being a dickhead but I understood. The trainman was unhappy, and he had a point about the air getting fouled regardless of who burned the coal. But I couldn’t really see why it was necessary for anyone to burn it, when solar and wind power is abundant and practically free. I would take that question down to West Virginia in November. I went back to watching the ballgame and making notes.

“What is that, Arabic? Are you writing in like, fucking, Arabic?”

“No,” I said. “I just write small.”

“So that’s English?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s English. Seriously? Jesus. I don’t mean to be a dick.”

My notebook was part travel log and part diary, and in it I wondered why I was so unhappy in the middle of my life when on the surface it seemed fine. I could make a list of unhappy people I knew, of failed marriages and lost jobs, of addicts, of worse. And then I began to make notes about the angry train man, and about Pittsburgh, which had pulled itself
out of darkness and should have been a happier place to visit. Mr. Mencken ought to come back from the dead to take a look today, the way the universities have grown up and have great art museums and theater schools, the way the light shines on those glass towers and reflects off three rivers. People water ski there. All of this, and yet so many are still so unhappy. In the nineteenth century, rivers meant work; immigrants settled in the slums of Pittsburgh and they all went to work, even the children, in terrible conditions and for little in return. That’s how great we once were: jobs for everyone, even your kids. Was that better? Was going backward ever a very good idea?

Andrew Carnegie’s first job was as a bobbin boy at a Pittsburgh knitting mill, twelve-hour days, six days a week, earning less than five dollars a month. He hustled his way into a train job, invested in all the hot commodities of the day: first the railroads, then the ironworks that were building the railroads. He had a lock on the iron right at the moment when the world learned to turn iron into steel. He made a fortune in the Pennsylvania oil fields when he was only twenty-nine years old; he pumped that fortune into steel technology. In 1888 he bought the Homestead Steel Works, on the Monongahela River near Pittsburgh, and created Carnegie Steel.

Meanwhile, Henry Clay Frick was getting rich making coke—a condensed, intensely hot-burning form of the coal dug from the nearby mountains. Burning coke releases the smell of sulfur that I found so touching in college, and it makes furnaces hotter than hell, and that heat is what turns iron ore into steel. Frick and Carnegie got together and made an empire.

What I love about these stories is understanding how it’s all connected. One line connects Rockefeller to oil and oil to Carnegie, and the rivers and lakes connect all the cities and all of it grew up nearly at once, not so long ago. To know of this and see Pittsburgh makes sense of Pittsburgh. To know about Cleveland and Rockefeller, and then visit the refineries in New Jersey, where I grew up, and to know that Rockefeller built those too, is like reaching through space-time to refocus the picture, discovering my own life inside the web. I went not long ago to see the refineries in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in the shadows of the Goethals Bridge; I wandered through a neighborhood beneath the bridge at the edges of a modern
industrial badland, an incomprehensible jungle of tanks and ducts and many-storied stacks that grew from a seed John Rockefeller planted. I had never thought of the mess of New Jersey as part of a grand story; it always very simply seemed to me, passing in a car up on the Turnpike viaduct, that New Jersey was an ugly place, and required no further explanation. I was wrong. Down below the web of elevated roadways there was a little world, and in that world are stories, and in one story, in a neighborhood known to locals as “down under,” the old houses and bars had been marked for demolition because the Goethals Bridge was soon to be expanded. There was a cul de sac in that near-abandoned maw called Rockefeller Street. It had a strip club on the corner, also empty when I saw it and marked to be destroyed. That a street in this place had ever been meant to honor Rockefeller is itself a strange idea, connecting him to that space in a way I’m sure few imagine anymore, and perhaps few but me have lately considered that Rockefeller, a staunch Baptist, would have been sickened by the dance club on the corner of his street. Whether the oil workers at that club drinking beer after their shift was ever thought of this or not, they were there because of John D. Rockefeller, because of Titusville. To know this connects me to a kind of secret life, the story of how what we see arrived as it did, and how it was lost, and how this fate awaits everything.

Rockefeller, Frick, Carnegie. Great men, yes, but it was so much easier to make a fortune when all this land’s resources were up for grabs. The land itself was up for grabs. It was free to take. We would call that welfare now. We would despise the homesteaders and call them freeloaders. Andrew Carnegie was a truly impressive rags-to-riches guy, and I’m sure he would have been a hero to the drunken trainman at the bar, in theory. But a hundred years or more ago, the trainman would have found himself on the business end of Carnegie’s union-busting guns and would not have liked him. Guys like Frick and Carnegie started as poor urchins and became self-made men. True. Also true: they had opportunities that Mr. Trainman never had, and never will. Whatever comes next in this country, we can’t just grab land and resources anymore, and the future can’t possibly look like the past, so it’s pointless to want to go back there.

My drunken dickhead friend and I watched the Steelers lose. The Packers and the Bills also lost that day. It was a massacre for the Rust Belt
but the Sun Belt did okay. Miami won, the bastards. Fucking Florida. So goddamn unfair. So goddamn disrespectful. The drunken man had a look in his eye like he wanted to kill something. I thought of De Niro, and I thought of my old favorite movie, *The Deer Hunter*, I thought about that group of young men from steel country, and the movie’s golden rule: kill clean. Don’t add to any creature’s misery. “One shot,” De Niro said. “Two is pussy.” Drunken Dick’s lip curled a little, and he slowly slid to the side of his bar stool, then straightened up. His dinner arrived in a to-go bag, and he left.

*The Deer Hunter* is set in the Pennsylvania steel city of Clairton, a few miles south of Pittsburgh. Clairton was once home to the world’s largest steel mill, built by the behemoth U.S. Steel Corporation. J. P. Morgan made U.S. Steel after buying out Andrew Carnegie. Mills and mines and coke plants spawned for miles along Pittsburgh’s rivers, and small steel-making cities grew around them: McKeesport and Braddock and Rankin and Monessen, Homestead, Duquesne. All cities built by steel. All distressed cities now.

Monday morning, Colby and I headed down into the Monongahela Valley on narrow roads spotted with dollar stores and pharmacies; here and there were bars and liquor stores, though a fair amount of those were boarded up like most everything else. That’s always the last thing to go, I’ve noticed. We raced along a narrow road into the valley and crossed at last beneath a low concrete underpass, then into its long shadow angled over the road. When we emerged from that darkness, we were facing a sign that said, “Welcome to Clairton, City of Prayer.” I took Colby’s picture in front of the sign and then pushed on like a touring fan into the heart of the Deer Hunter’s hometown.

Perhaps it seems I chose to visit this place because I loved a movie about it. It didn’t happen exactly that way. I was following a call, but not quite deliberately, and in hindsight I’m not surprised that I kept arriving at places I needed to see, just as I was carrying Ida Tarbell’s book about Standard Oil. Rolling into Clairton, I had a sense of finally arriving in a hidden world I had imagined as a child was some empathetic, kindred spirit home.
of mine. I had stared into the hills as my family drove by and had longed to see what was hidden back there, and now at last I had arrived. But I had not deliberately gone off to find *The Deer Hunter*. I understood what I had done only as I moved through it, and knew it was exactly right.

The movie, of course, is about loss and sorrow, so I couldn’t have expected to find anything uplifting in Clairton, except that it was, in my mind, a *good* place, one that nurtured those young men—those steel workers, beer drinkers, deer hunters; those certain Americans who grew up in a hard-working hometown that they loved. Clairton was home to those friends, thus in my mind it harbored values I perhaps romanticized, but also, I expected something much deeper from it; this place as I understood it had survived a deep trauma. I imagined it to be a wise and strong place as a result. I must have imagined someone there knew how to navigate fear and sorrow and the crisis at the center of a life, and surely someone did. But the only person I would meet or even see in Clairton was a homeless man on a lonely street who asked me for money. I see now the mistake of my imaginings; no longed-for cinematic resolution had arrived. The trauma had come, and then the wound deepened, but the place had not yet survived.

I drove up the hill into the center of Clairton and began searching for a place to park. By searching for a place to park, I don’t mean to suggest there was competition for a few open spaces. Cars had raced me on the rain-slick streets down by the river, but up in the old center of Clairton there were exactly zero cars besides mine; the wide streets on the hilltop and the sidewalks along them were empty. Everything was empty but for one tiny bar, lit by a red beer sign, its door a thin crack in a long, hard wall of abandonment. No one actually “needs” to park on a street where buildings are boarded up and gutted, so parking spaces were abundant. What I was searching for, then, was not a parking place so much as a safe place to park the car with my beloved old Colby inside.

Colby, a sensitive and highly emotional dog, must have had his nerves stretched already by the dark mood we had entered. The space around us was overcast and misty and generally unfriendly. In his old age my dog, who once shattered records for speed laps at his dog run, preferred standing and sniffing things to walking, mostly; he could not be counted on to
run from danger if he had to. It is hard to actually run away from persist-ent, generalized anxiety under any conditions, but running from it while literally dragging an old dog is a special kind of foolishness, so in the end, for lack of a safer option, I parked on the street and kept moving the car to keep him near me. It was not people I feared, but more the lack of them, as if some malevolent force had left this place not quite alive, but not dead either. A creosote plant remains in Clairton, turning coal tar into wood preservative and other chemicals; the sharp smell of sulfur and tar, and a soft mechanical hum underneath it, hinted at a menacing force that was toying with that place and might toy with our lives if we let it. I conjured a vision of Satan disguised as my Buffalo friend Bob the Builder, in his blue jeans and work shirt, a contractor of doom taking measurements on the sidewalk. “Almost finished,” he says. “Won’t be long.” I see the expression on his face, a wary smile behind a clipboard.

The city was still. It felt as if a plague had swept through. Houses climb steep hillsides in Clairton and there must have been people in some of them, but their curtains were drawn and because of the rain as much as
any underlying sadness, the people were not coming out that day. Plague is an accurate analogy, actually, because in the fourteenth century when the Black Death arrived in Europe, something like a third to one-half of the population of that entire continent died; imagine sitting with your two best friends and one or both disappearing in a blink. The Deer Hunter on patrol in Vietnam, his buddies snuffed by sniper fire. Dead. Between 1960 and 1990 in Clairton, Pennsylvania, half the population disappeared. By 2013, four out of five bodies were gone.

Meanwhile, consider the ones left behind: nearly every kid at Clairton High School qualifies as economically disadvantaged. Only about 64 percent will graduate. The proficiency rate for high school science hovers around 5 percent. One year not long before my visit, the number of eleventh-grade Clairton girls who reached science proficiency was exactly zero. Not one of them could grasp it; not one of their minds could hold a thought as critical as, say, evolution. How would they survive in a world they couldn’t even understand?

I don’t mean to pick on Clairton. It just happens to be the town a movie I love was set in. The Pennsylvania Distressed Cities Act was passed in 1987 to turn the ruined steel economies around. Clairton joined the distressed cities list in 1988. Twenty-seven Pennsylvania cities have been designated distressed over the life of the program; only six ever “recovered.” Legislators fixed this problem in 2014. The solution, simply put, was to limit the time cities are allowed to remain distressed. Set a deadline. After that, you can’t be poor anymore. You’re off the list. You’ve graduated.

I returned to my car, where Colby lifted his head to sniff the fear, and we rolled through Clairton as if it were a Hollywood soundstage whose last scene was shot a long time before then. “One shot,” De Niro tells his friend. “Two is pussy.” A shot deer who isn’t killed is suffering, and if you let that happen, the grief belongs to you.